

## CURRICULUM COMMITTEE MINUTES

25 April 2008 (Friday)

Misner Room

**Present:** Jane Brazell , Derek Buescher, Jordan Conley, Alyce DeMarais, Kriszta Kotsis, Mary Rose Lamb (Chair), Lynda Livingston, Paul Loeb, Bob Matthews, Elise Richman, Florence Sandler, Brad Tomhave , Barbara Warren

**Call to order.** Chair Lamb called the meeting to order at 9:05

**Remarks by the Chair:** There were no opening remarks

**Approval of Minutes of April 18, 2008:** The Secretary apologized for the lack of minutes from the last meeting.

### **Announcements:**

**Jordan Conley** has won a Watson Fellowship.

**DeMarais** thanked those who worked on the reaccreditation task..

### **Working Group Reports:**

WG 1: **DeMarais M/S/P** that the Committee **accept** the five year review of the Communication Studies Department.

**DeMarais M/S/P approval** of Connections 372, The Gilded Age: Literary Realism and Historical Reality, taught by Professor MacBain.

WG 2: **Loeb** reported that Working Group 2 had **completed** its work for the year.

WG 3: **Livingston** reported on behalf of Working Group 3 and presented the working group's review of the Connections Core (attached as Appendix A). Some of the principle points in the review included the fact that the Connections Core rubric incorporates elements of the older Comparative Values core and the Science in Context core. Although no firm recommendations came from the faculty during the discussion hosted by Working Group 3, there was discussion on the interdisciplinary nature of current course offerings, the problems of team-teaching and the academic training of individual faculty (related to the issue of interdisciplinary courses). There was interest in addressing issues of race and gender as a

part of this core area. Faculty at the hosted discussion expressed the feeling that this core area was still valuable.

**DeMarais** noted that the work of the Curriculum Committee in the 2008 – 2009 academic year will include the “fallow year” discussion of the core as a whole. There was further discussion on how to follow up this discussion next year with the suggestion that further discussion include students and newer faculty. The report of Working Group 3 will be available to the 2008 – 2009 Curriculum Committee.

At the end, **Loeb M/S/P** to **accept** the review of the Connections Core.

WG 4: Working Group 4 has **completed** its work for the year..

WG 5: Working Group 5 has **completed** its work for the year..

### **Continued Discussion of Calendar Setting (agenda item 5)**

Following some further discussion on the wording of the “Livingston Rule”, **Sandler M/S/P** that the original motion (please see the minutes of the March 28 and April 18 meetings of the Curriculum Committee) be modified to read

**“Final grades be due by noon on the first Monday two weeks after the end of the final exam period or January 2, whichever is later.”**

After some further discussion, **Loeb M/S/P** this motion as modified.

### **Further Business**

DeMarais reported that there was a course remaining to approve in the Fine Arts Core. The Committee approved a process by which it would vote on this specific course by email.

### **Adjournment**

The Committee’s work for the year completed (except for final approval of pending Fine Arts Approaches course), **Richman M/S/P** we adjourn, and we did adjourn at 9:35.

Respectfully submitted  
Bob Matthews

## Appendix A: Report of Working Group 3

DATE: April 24, 2008

TO: Members of the Curriculum Committee

FROM: Working Group III: Lynda Livingston (lead), Alyce DeMarais, Fred Hamel, Florence Sandler  
(with thanks for the tremendous contributions by our fall-semester member, Brad Dillman)

RE: Connections Review

Dear Members of the Committee:

We have spent a year fully immersed in Connections issues. We approved several courses, and failed to approve one. It was in consideration of the latter that we most fully engaged the rubric to consider what a Connections course should be. The issues that we faced (in one case, we took the unprecedented step of bringing a course to the full Curriculum Committee), along with responses to our faculty questionnaire and feedback from our spring-term meeting with many of the Connections faculty, lead us offer the following comments to future committees. Notes from the meeting with faculty are presented in Appendix A.

### **basics**

#### ◆ *the value of a senior-level core course*

The faculty present at the Connections review meeting strongly supported a core requirement for the junior or senior year. While a few faculty members think an earlier requirement might help students know how to approach interdisciplinary issues later when they are in their majors, most felt that the current requirement forces students, even if uncomfortably, to take a look at the world from a perspective outside their disciplinary boundaries. It also reminds students that our goal is to provide them with a *liberal arts* education. Several faculty suggested that some upper divisions students find the course as a hoop to jump through. This affects how faculty experience the course - and may influence junior faculty to shy away from teaching Connections courses. Some stated that a small percentage of students in their courses were consistently "checked out." However, more than a few faculty argued that their Connections course(s) are their favorite courses and they "rarely have a bad day" with them. Several faculty agreed that a student survey or focus groups regarding the Connections core is needed, and encourage the subcommittee to conduct such work (in conjunction with Institutional Research).

#### ◆ *explicit guidelines*

The guidelines for Connections, especially regarding interdisciplinarity, are difficult to apply. It is sometimes hard for subcommittee members from different areas to evaluate or even identify the different "lenses" a proposer will bring to material.<sup>1</sup> One special difficulty is the evaluation of courses that use one discipline as the *object* of review by another discipline, rather than another

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<sup>1</sup> The "lens" construct has been used to assess Connections courses since their inception; however, its definition and provenance are murky.

voice speaking (for example, are students reading articles about a discipline and then merely reporting on them, or are students truly *engaging* with that discipline?). The subcommittee longed for explicit guidelines, but recognizes that such guidelines might unduly restrict proposers. In addition, both the full Curriculum Committee and the Connections faculty expressed their faith in the subcommittee to make the necessary determinations. The use of previously approved courses is relevant here. The subcommittee reviews each course and rather than having a simple formula to apply, relies on earlier precedents (previous Connections decisions) to help interpret and apply the guidelines. It is therefore important to keep records about deliberations, including the rationales for course approval or disapproval. There seem to be three different types of Connections courses: 1) those team-taught by faculty members from different disciplines, 2) interdisciplinary courses taught by one person, and 3) topic-oriented courses that employ multiple approaches. Having a sense of these different models is important for the review process.

◆ *content*

The faculty at the Connections review meeting noted the “Frankenstein” nature of the Connections course, given that the rubric involves aspects of the previous Comparative Values and Science in Context core areas. While some faculty seemed more interested in perpetuating the Comparative Values part of the course, science faculty noted that they were happy to have the opportunity to explore issues that did not fit into more traditional science courses. Many faculty seem excited about the possibility that Connections could be restructured to address critical content (like race issues). This latter issue needs continued discussion.

**logistics**

◆ *team teaching*

Courses team-taught by professors from different disciplines are more easily recognizable as interdisciplinary to the subcommittee. (These professors need not be from different “ways of knowing”; a course taught by a psychologist and an economist would be considered interdisciplinary, for example.) However, a single instructor with the proper background can bring the required interdisciplinarity to a course. This point was echoed by those faculty who attended our Connections review meeting. One difficulty about team teaching, noted by the faculty, is the larger class size (44 students as compared to 22 students).

We are, however, unable to define “proper background.” Review of the proposer’s credentials and testimonials by other faculty were very valuable in our assessment. We hope that individual proposers of future courses will help the curriculum committee’s reviewers by addressing this issue explicitly.

◆ *guest speakers*

The subcommittee applauds the use of guest speakers. However, we are uncomfortable approving courses whose interdisciplinarity appears contingent upon the availability of guest speakers.

◆ *students’ group work*

It is not uncommon for instructors to plan to create working groups by drawing together students from different majors. However, this alone is insufficient evidence of interdisciplinarity (and it may be impossible to effect in practice).

Given these issues, we offer the following suggestions for future curriculum review:

1. The faculty should consider whether interdisciplinarity should be the focus of the course, or whether we may want to turn to a content focus (e.g., race, climate change).
2. Revision of the rubric should incorporate student input (perhaps through focus groups).
3. The faculty should consider the incorporation of skill requirement (e.g., writing).

Sincerely,

Lynda Livingston

Alyce DeMarais

Fred Hamel

Florence Sandler

## APPENDIX A: NOTES FROM THE 04/16/08 FACULTY DISCUSSION

### Connections Core Area Discussion

04-16-08

Moderator: Lynda Livingston

Working Group: Fred Hamel, Florence Sandler, Alyce DeMarais (scribe)

Twenty-six faculty members, in addition to the working group members, joined the discussion of the Connections core area. Lynda opened the discussion, after introductions, by reviewing that the Connections core area was developed by the faculty and this review is designed to assess and “evolve” the core area through faculty input. The working group, on behalf of the Curriculum Committee, wants to assess the efficacy of the Connections rubric and the core area in general.

Derek asked for a brief summary of the written responses submitted by the faculty teaching in the Connections core area. Lynda summarized the responses for the question on interdisciplinarity. Fred noted that this was an area of ambiguity for the Curriculum Committee: the relationship between/among disciplines in a given course and how they are represented. Barry thought that students may receive the message that one discipline is favored over another based on the personalities of the instructors. Lynda wondered if this would be the case with one instructor. Robin noted that there is no simple answer to the question of interdisciplinarity. It depends on the intersection of material and, in some courses, one person can represent this well.

Derek wondered if we should rethink what Connections means. George suggested an interdisciplinary course should come sooner, perhaps during the first semester of the Sophomore year. He argued that Connections as a senior course seems out of place as seniors are immersed in their major fields of study. Florence reminded us of the intention of the Connections core: to challenge students, before they leave the university, that disciplines other than their own exist and interact. George noted that the core area doesn't work as designed because students from disciplines outside the ones covered in the course have difficulty engaging with the material in a meaningful way. Carolyn asserted that Connections works well as an upper division course. She noted that bringing together students with varied exposure to given disciplines is awkward but necessary as students may not move beyond their comfort zone on their own.

Barry noted that Connections is a “Frankenstein” course with a rubric cobbled together from Science in Context and Comparative Values. He asked what purpose we want this core area to have? What significant role do we want to fulfill? He asserted that we could leave the Connections core as a “placeholder” while the faculty determined what this core area should be. He noted that we are becoming interdisciplinary-rich in many areas; therefore, a single interdisciplinary course may be redundant or misleading. What is the function of a single, interdisciplinary course in an interdisciplinary environment?

Hans asked if we enjoyed teaching this course, noting that he does. Robin agreed and appreciated that she can teach students from across the university. While she agreed with George that it was difficult to bring all students into the discussion, she purposefully developed assignments that open dialog. She did not think this would work at a lower level. Andy agreed, noting that he can address questions that he couldn't in a Physics course.

David Tinsley expressed sympathy for the Curriculum Committee working group in approving courses when the rubric allows for “hopeless variety.” He suggested we poll students regarding

their experience of the course. He noted that junior faculty members are often counseled to not teach a Connections course due to the potential for poor teaching evaluations. David noted that some students do not want a rigorous course and approach the course with a minimum of effort. David works hard to discourage this attitude in his Scholarly and Creative Inquiry Seminar. James provided anecdotal evidence that his classes went well and his evaluations for his Connections course were not different from his other courses. Jill mentioned that class size makes a difference. She likes to team-teach but finds the increased class size makes it less successful with students. Nick agreed with David that students can be resentful that they “have” to take an upper division core course. He enjoys teaching the course but finds it challenging because students don’t want to be there. Tiffany noted that while her evaluations were good, the students were resentful about taking a challenging course, particularly given that she was teaching in the summer. As with Nick, Tiffany has also heard student refer to the Connections requirement as “a pain” and “a joke.”

Lynda noted that faculty member responses indicated that students do not understand the purpose of the Connections core. Derek indicated that the rubric addresses process rather than content. Barry agreed that the rubric leaves the content to the faculty. He noted that we teach courses we feel good about but he wondered if the students agree. Nick noted that the upper division graduation requirement in bringing students outside their majors; therefore, Connections as originally conceived may not be necessary. Robin reported that her course became much more successful when she made it a writing course, removing discipline-specific assignments. She found the students engaged with the material more. Robin wondered if focusing on a mission-specific objective, such as writing, would be a more useful and understandable goal for this core area. Carolyn agreed that many students are not inherently interested in the interdisciplinary nature of the course “pick and choose” what aspects of the course they want to work on more than others.

Lynda then turned our attention to assessment of the course. Robin gave an example of how she assesses her course. On the first day of class students write about what they know about the themes of the course. As part of the final exam, students re-examine what they wrote on the first day and comment again. This technique allows for assessment of what students have gained from the course. David Smith noted that we should not assess students on papers only. He noted that some students may not have taken many humanities courses at the upper division level, for example, and therefore it is fairer to have a range of assessments. Julian gave an example of a mechanism he is testing in his course. The students present their “paper” on a poster. This provides a forum for peer evaluation as well as instructor evaluation. He also uses this strategy for providing peer feedback on the final paper proposals – the students present their proposals on the posters.

We then turned to the Curriculum Committee (CC) review of Connections course proposals. Lynda noted that the CC membership changes each year and, as a result, the guidelines can be interpreted differently each year. Julian observed that there seem to be three different types of Connections courses: 1) those team-taught by faculty members from different disciplines, 2) interdisciplinary courses taught by one person, and 3) topic-oriented courses that employ multiple approaches. Julian noted that the CC having a sense of these different models was important for the review process. Derek thought this is a result of having a rubric that does not specify content. He suggested we could insert language about content and making connections. For example, we could tie the course to other aspects of the campus such as the Civic Scholarship Initiative. In other words, Connections courses could be cross-disciplinary in other ways. Hans suggested that CC members, especially those on the working group charged with reviewing Connections courses, be screened for flexibility and tolerance. Fred suggested that we “let teaching happen.”

Lynda asked if there is value in an upper division core requirement. Diane said there is value because we are challenging students to think in a different way. Nick noted that we should not just do what students like, or are comfortable with. Barry noted that the three unit upper division requirement fulfilled this objective; however, Diane does not think this requirement challenges the students as much as Connections. Barry suggested a checklist of the pros and cons of the Connections core, including resentment of students and lack of junior faculty participation (due to the worry of poor evaluations). Florence recalled that though she was skeptical of the “two discipline” focus at the outset of the implementation of the “new core” but finds it remarkable how many of the faculty responding to the recent questionnaire saw that definition as helpful. She noted that the rubric stemmed from a political compromise but the outcomes are exciting. Jim Evans spoke in favor of an upper division core course. We should be more ambitious than letting students settle into their majors, retreating into disciplinary strongholds. Zaixin spoke eloquently and passionately about how exciting the experience of teaching Connections has been for him. He relished the “topics beyond imagination” and the responsibility to challenge students and give them the opportunity to grow.

Dexter Gordon relayed that he and Grace Livingston had taught a Connections course for the past four years. They are dismayed that students in their courses are ready to graduate yet it is the first time the students have encountered material, especially on issues of race. Dexter urged us to ask, “What are the basic elements we should ensure all our students encounter?” A student can take courses in the Ways of Knowing but still not encounter issues of race. In the Connections course, students interrogate their own disciplines through the lens of race via education, cultural studies, and rhetorical studies.

Tiffany asked why Connections courses must be interdisciplinary. She noted that there is more to the liberal arts than interdisciplinarity and wondered if we could rethink the core requirement but move the courses faculty love into the departments and programs. We should have a conversation about what we want the junior/senior experience to include, especially regarding issues of diversity and race. She noted that we confront complacency with these courses but students remain complacent. Nick suggested we have focus groups with students to determine whether we are achieving the goals of this core area. Alyce noted that Randy Nelson is doing this. Carolyn reported that she had assembled her own advisory committee when she developed her course. She did not want to team teach because of the size of the class and she felt it was impractical to bring in colleagues too much. She suggested that support for visiting faculty in these courses would be helpful.

At 6:00 PM Lynda noted the time and closed the meeting. She thanked everyone for participating. She noted that the discussion will continue as we did not resolve some important points. She invited feedback from the faculty.

Post-meeting notes:

- Alyce: continue this review next year, evaluating the purpose of the Connections core, including discussions with all faculty, not just those teaching in the core area (perhaps two or three discussion forums early in the fall); also, work with Randy Nelson to include student opinion and assessment.
- Robin: what kind of skills do we want students to leave with (such as writing)? These skills transcend the disciplines and could be embraced by many courses at the upper division level.



- James: think about the purpose of the Connections core area; does it need to be outside of disciplines (for example, Physics of Music is offered within Physics but draws a lot of students from other majors).
- The discussion continued for quite some time after we adjourned. Could this core area morph into a discussion of the “other” (race, class, gender, with, perhaps, religion and ethnicity).